

Focus on Missile Defense

Lawmakers urge study on device for commercial aircraft

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WASHINGTON BUREAU

May 16, 2003

Washington - Under pressure from Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington), Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and others on Capitol Hill, the Department of Homeland Security will ask defense firms to study the development of a missile defense system for commercial aircraft to protect against shoulder-fired missile attacks, lawmakers said.

The two New Yorkers and Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) said yesterday that the department will issue a report in the next few days, recognizing the danger that small, portable missiles, such as Stingers, pose to commercial aircraft and call for studies on how best to defend against them. Military planes have had anti-missile defense equipment for years, and the department is looking to the same firms that make the military version to come up with a device for passenger planes.

Northrop Grumman, with a facility on Long Island, is a manufacturer of the Directed Infrared Counter Measure and is likely to be one of the contractors, sources on Capitol Hill said. An Israeli firm that makes missile warning and countermeasure equipment is also a possibility. Adapting military-style anti-missile devices - such as those that throw out signals to confuse a heat-seeking projectile - poses many challenges, including the relative lack of maneuverability of commercial planes and the extra weight the devices would add.

Legislation authored by Israel and included in the supplemental funding bill to finance the war in Iraq called on the department to undertake the study on anti-missile devices for commercial airplanes. Lawmakers estimate it would take \$10 billion to outfit the entire U.S. commercial airline fleet.

"We know the threat is there and we have technology to guard against it. We cannot afford to dawdle and leave our planes unprotected," Israel said.

The fact that the department is moving quickly to implement the legislative mandate is indicative of the seriousness with which they take the threat, lawmakers said, and possibly indicative of evidence of such a plot. Homeland security spokesman Brian Roehrka declined to provide details but said "the report provides a plan to determine if a viable technology exists" for commercial airplanes.

"When the Homeland Security Department, in concert with intelligence agencies, looks at what are our greatest dangers, this comes out very high," Schumer said. When asked about the swiftness of the department's actions, he said, "They do have information ... that various terrorist groups have these Stinger missiles. Your assumption that they are moving quickly because they recognize the danger - uncharacteristically quickly - is correct."

While Congress approved the legislation calling for a study of the feasibility of installing anti-missile devices on commercial planes, there are some who are skeptical that such devices would be the most cost-effective way to prevent attacks from hand-held missiles. They cite, for example, patrolling perimeters of airports to nab potential terrorists before they attack as one other way.

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